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University staff demographics: the fabric of UK universities at risk from Brexit

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Theresa May acknowledged in an open letter dated 11 December 2017 that the UK would be 'poorer' if non-UK EU citizens living in the UK were to leave as a result of Brexit. This statement is especially relevant to the UK higher education (HE) sector, and to EU staff working at UK universities.

EU citizens working at UK universities are particularly concentrated among the academic staff. On average, 17.4% (35,920) of academic staff are from EU countries (2016-17, HESA), whereas they make up only 6.4% (13,610) of non-academic staff. Many non-UK EU academics are employed in fields where the domestic pool of candidates is insufficient. These include subject areas crucial to the UK's industrial strategy, such as science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). Economics, modern languages, mathematics, physics and chemical engineering top the ranking of academic disciplines with the highest proportions of non-UK EU staff, with a whopping 36.4, 34.9, 28.5, 27.7 and 26.3 per cent respectively (British Academy, 2017, p.19).

Non-UK EU academic staff numbers are particularly high at the London-based and Scottish Russell Group universities, Manchester and Oxbridge (Table 1). Those universities with the highest research power in the last Research Excellence Framework (REF, 2014) exercise, and who have the best track record of securing EU research grants, attract the highest numbers of non-UK EU academic staff. For example, the top six universities in both these research excellence exercises (REF and Horizon 2020) are identical: Oxford, UCL, Cambridge, Edinburgh, Manchester and Imperial. These institutions are among the seven universities that are most attractive to non-UK EU academic staff (in absolute numbers), alongside King's College London. The non-UK EU academic staff ratios are so high in these universities (roughly over a quarter, except for Manchester) that they cannot be incidental to the quality and quantity of these universities' research outputs. Glasgow, LSE and Queen Mary follow suit, confirming that London and Scotland are destinations of choice for non-UK EU staff, a pattern already observed with non-UK EU students.

While large institutions such as Birmingham and Manchester have the capacity to attract significant numbers of non-UK EU academic staff, proportionally-speaking their power of attraction is not comparable to that of the London or Scottish Russell Group universities or Oxbridge. English universities outside London and Oxbridge do not appear to be as attractive, proportionally-speaking, to non-UK EU academic staff, although a few of the more research intensive Russell Group universities, such as Southampton and Warwick, have high numbers and ratios of non-UK EU academic staff of just over 20 per cent. Northern Ireland is a case that requires particular attention, because of the large proportion of Irish nationals working in its two universities, with both universities having either close to or over one in three of their academic staff from the EU, a staggering figure that is somehow exceeded by LSE (39%) and matched by Imperial (32%).

The 10 highest proportions of non-UK EU academic staff are found in Cambridge, Kent, London and Northern Ireland (Table 2). Bar the exception of Canterbury, this data coincides with the voting patterns of nations (Northern Ireland) and cities (Cambridge and London) that voted Remain, highlighting the generally positively perceived beneficial impact of large non-UK EU populations in these areas. While recent declarations from the Prime Minister acknowledging the beneficial impact of 'the three million' EU citizens on the UK economy, society and culture are welcome, it should be emphasised that with regard to the HE sector, which represents the UK's 5th largest export (House of Commons, 25 April 2017), the non-UK EU contribution is exceptionally high, and the quality and ultimately the reputation of UK universities depends on the easy and flexible movement of people between EU countries.

University	Non-UK EU academic staff	Total number of academic staff	Percentage of non-UK EU academic staff	National membership (other than Universities UK & Universities Scotland)
1. UCL	2, 020	7, 415	27.2%	Russell Group
2. University of Oxford	1, 700	6, 770	25.1%	Russell Group
3. Uni. of Cambridge	1, 555	5, 965	26.1%	Russell Group
4. = Imperial College	1, 385	4, 330	32%	Russell Group
= King's College London		4, 840	28.6%	Russell Group
6. University of Edinburgh	1, 140	4, 650	24.5%	Russell Group
7. University of Manchester	960	5, 195	18.5%	Russell Group
8. University of Glasgow	795	3, 840	20.7%	Russell Group
9. LSE	665	1, 705	39%	Russell Group
10. Queen Mary	655	2, 385	27.5%	Russell Group
11. Uni. of Southampton	645	3, 030	21.3%	Russell Group
12. = University of Warwick	635	2, 855	22.2%	Russell Group
= Uni. of Birmingham		3, 625	17.5%	Russell Group
14. University of Nottingham	605	3, 420	17.7%	Russell Group
15. University of Bristol	580	3, 175	18.3%	Russell Group
16. = University of Liverpool	550	2, 835	19.4%	Russell Group
= Newcastle University		2, 910	18.9%	Russell Group
18. Cardiff University	545	3, 465	15.7%	Russell Group
19. City University	530	2, 105	25.2%	N/A
20. University of Sheffield	515	3, 270	15.7%	Russell Group
21. Open University	510	5, 255	9.7%	University Alliance
22. University of Leeds	505	3, 485	14.5%	Russell Group
23. Queen's Uni. Belfast	495	1, 665	29.7%	Russell Group
24. Uni. of the Arts, London	490	3, 275	15%	N/A
25. Ulster University	445	1, 260	35.3%	N/A
26. University of Exeter	400	2, 055	19.5%	Russell Group
27. = University of Kent	385	1,425	27%	N/A
= University of Sussex		1, 865	20.6%	N/A
29. Uni. of Westminster	355	1, 770	20.1%	N/A
30. = University of Leicester	350	1,645	21.3%	N/A
= University of York		1, 790	19.6%	Russell Group

Table 1: Universities (>5,000 students) with the highest numbers (excluding atypicals) of non-UK EU academic staff (teaching only, teaching & research, research only, neither teaching nor research), FPE (full-person equivalent), 2016-17 (data extracted from HESA, policy analysis CGHE)

University	Percentage of non-UK EU academic staff (%)
1. LSE	39
2. Ulster University	35.3
3. Imperial College	32
4. Queen's Uni. Belfast	29.7
5. King's College London	28.6
6. Queen Mary	27.5
7. UCL	27.2
8. Uni. of Kent	27
9. Uni. of Cambridge	26.1
10. City University	25.2

Table 2: Universities (>5,000 students) with the highest percentage (excluding atypicals) of non-UK EU academic staff (teaching only, teaching & research, research only, neither teaching nor research), FPE (full-person equivalent), 2016-17 (data extracted from HESA, policy analysis CGHE)

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